

Canberra Baptist Church

9.00 & 10.30am, Sun 23 July 2017

Who We Are and to Whom We Pray

Scripture

Matthew 6:5-15 and Romans 8:12-27

Introduction

Prayer is basic and essential. At one level, it's quite simple, isn't it – talking, conversation. But at another, it is profound and mysterious – connecting with the Divine. If we are honest, it's something we all struggle with from time to time, or perhaps most of the time, whether for spiritual, theological or practical reasons, or for reasons of circumstance. The request of Jesus' disciples finds echo in our spirits – *“Lord, teach us to pray”*.

Tim Keller in his book on prayer says: *“Prayer is the only entryway into genuine self-knowledge. It is also the main way we experience deep change – the reordering of our loves. Prayer is how God gives us so many of the unimaginable things he has for us... It is the way we know God, the way we finally treat God as God. Prayer is simply the key to everything we need to do and be in life. We must learn to pray. We have to.”*¹

The great news is that we have divine help as we pray and as we try to learn to pray better. We were reminded in our reading from Romans 8 (v26) that *“the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes...”*

Together as a Church we are serious about this. That's why our current preaching series is on [prayer, and the Lord's Prayer in particular. It's a particularly relevant series as we proceed with our Church Review and have input to consider from various guest speakers over the next few weeks.

Last Sunday Belinda introduced the series by talking about prayer and the Lord's Prayer from Luke 11.

The other place we find the Lord's Prayer is in Mt 6, the reading we had earlier. In Mt, the prayer is part of a collection of Jesus' teaching that we refer to as the Sermon on the Mount. The context is different from Luke's. In Mt 6:1, Jesus warns about *“practicing (our) piety before others in order to be seen by them”*. He then elaborates with reference to 3 practices that were central for Jews – almsgiving, prayer (our focus for this series) and fasting.

Jesus begins the section on prayer by talking about how not to pray.

1. Firstly, he says don't pray like the hypocrites (v5)

Here Jesus is referring in particular to the Jewish Pharisees and others who followed their practices. They would stand on the street corners and in the synagogues with hands raised and pray aloud, usually 3 times a day. Nothing particularly wrong with that. Certainly not the frequency. Nor standing with upraised hands and praying aloud, as that was normal Jewish practice. Not even with the public nature of it necessarily, because that could be commendable under the right circumstances. The problem is indicated by Jesus' words: *“so that they might be seen by others”*.

They weren't focussing on God as they prayed, but on impressing the crowds. You could even say that they weren't praying to God, but to their human audience. Rather than coming before God in humility, they were filled with pride and self-righteousness. While they gave the impression of being highly godly people, they were in fact quite the opposite.

Elsewhere Jesus referred to the as *“whited sepulchres”* -- white-washed on the outside but rotten on the inside. They were giving a false impression of what they were really like. They were putting on a performance. That's the nature of the hypocrite. The derivation of the word itself points to that. It comes from the Grk word *hypokrités*, which referred to the masked actors in Greek theatre. They were people acting out a part.

“In order to be seen by others” – The Grk verb in that expression is *theathonai*, again relating to theatre.

This is not how to pray. Christian prayer must be authentic, honest, sincere, humble, focussed on God and God's glory, not on our own.

2. Jesus says there's a second way not to pray (v7)

Don't pray like the Gentiles; the *ethnikoi*; literally, the ethnics; those from other nations; the "pagans" as some translations put it. They heap up empty phrases, vain repetitions, with the emphasis on vain.

It's going through the mechanics without the mind meaningfully engaged; without mindfulness as we would say these days.

The sound of the Grk word is onomatopoeic, so I think the NIV translation is a good one –

"Do not keep on babbling like the pagans."

They think that they are more likely to be heard because of their many words.

I like John Stott's commentary on this:

*"What an incredible notion! What sort of a God is this who is chiefly impressed by the mechanics and the statistics of prayer, and whose response is determined by the volume of words we use and the number of hours we spend in praying?... Christians do not believe in that kind of God. That is, we are not to do as they do because we do not think as they think. On the contrary, your Father knows what you need before you ask him. He is neither ignorant, so that we need to instruct him, nor hesitant, so that we need to persuade him. He is our Father – a Father who loves his children and knows all about our needs."*²

That leads us nicely into the prayer that Jesus gave his followers because it begins "Our Father".

In teaching them about prayer, he not only told them how not to pray, but went on to tell them how to pray. He gave them this prayer as a model.

We're looking at just the first couple of lines today – *"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name."*

Our Father

The first 2 words, "Our Father", are highly significant. The Aramaic word for father is "Abba", a very personal and even intimate term. It's the word that Jesus used when addressing his Father in prayer.

In instructing them to begin their prayer with the same term, Jesus is inviting his disciples to share in his relationship with the Father. The plural "our" highlights the communal nature of the prayer, as Belinda was sharing with the children. That balances the earlier instruction about praying secretly in one's room, which relates to individual, private prayer.

The concept of God as Father was not a new one in Judaism. We can trace it right back to the book of Exodus and the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt. In Exodus 4 (v22,23), God tells Moses to say these words to Pharaoh: *"Thus says the LORD: Israel is my firstborn son. I said 'Let my son go that he may worship me.' But you have refused to let him go."*

As God's chosen people, they became known as the Children of God. Yet we don't find them addressing God as Father when they prayed. So it is a radical new departure from Jewish orthodoxy when Jesus addresses God that way in his prayers. It is even more shocking for him to teach that others could address God that same way.

Paul points out in our Romans reading that the privilege of being children of God is no longer based on being an Israelite or Jewish. *"For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God"* (8:14).

We have been adopted as it were into God's family. V15ff: *"You have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ..."*

As people who have experienced our own exodus from the bondage of slavery through Jesus, then we too are God's children who can confidently call God "Our Father"³.

For those who may have negative connotations of the word father because of their negative experiences with an earthly father, I hasten to add that God is the perfect, ideal father. We also need to remember, of course, that the

term is a metaphor as God is spirit and neither male nor female. Nonetheless, it expresses a very real truth – that God is personal, relational, loving and caring. Just think of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son for example. Theologians and philosophers struggle to find a better expression. Paul Tillich’s *“Ground of All Being”*, to take just one example, fails to my mind to adequately account for the personal, relational nature of God.

“Our Father in Heaven”

It’s a characteristic expression of Matthew’s. It’s not trying to give God’s location or specify where God lives, but emphasises God’s authority as the Creator and ruler of all things. This balances out and complements the conception of God as *“daddy”*. That’s reinforced by the next phrase –

“Hallowed be Your Name”

Hallowed means holy or honoured or revered. So we could paraphrase: *“May your name be revered.”* It irks me that the expression *“Oh My God”* has become so ubiquitous over recent years. For many, it seems to be said so often as nothing more than an exclamation of surprise, a vain, empty repetition. Sometimes it’s even abbreviated to just OMG. It irks me because I think it’s an insult to God to use the name God in such a flippant and thoughtless way. It’s rather curious I think that its frequency has been increasing at the same time as the number of those who say they have no religion has been increasing.

Having said that though, *“hallowed be your name”* is about much more than how the name God is used. In Jewish thought and usage, the name stands for the person who bears it, and for their nature and character. That’s why in Scripture there are numerous examples of people having their name changed after some momentous life-changing event. So God’s name stands for all that God has revealed to us about God’s nature, including holiness, love, justice, faithfulness and grace.

We are to hallow the name of God in the sense of revering God’s very being. The expression in the Lord’s Prayer is one that orients us. It reminds us that God is the centre, not us.

And it is also a call to action which makes demands of us. How are we as children of God going to make known God’s magnificence, love, justice and perfection in a world that increasingly wants to ignore God?

As children of God we bear the image of the Father and are to live to the honour and glory of God.

Conclusion

If I were to give this sermon a title, it would be *“Who We Are and to Whom We Pray”*. A bit cumbersome, but it emphasises my main point that we are loved children of an amazing, magnificent God. If we grasp that in its fullness, I’m convinced it would revolutionise our prayer-life and indeed revolutionise our lives full stop.

I’d like to close with a prayer from Martin Luther. Let’s pray.

*“Although... you could rightly and properly be a severe judge over us sinners... now through your mercy implant in our hearts a comforting trust in your fatherly love, and let us experience the sweet and pleasant savor of a childlike certainty that we may joyfully call you Father, knowing and loving you and calling on you in every trouble.”*⁴

Bibliography

1. Tim Keller, *“Prayer – Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God”* (2016, p.18)
 2. John Stott, Commentary on Matthew in *The Bible Speaks Today* series, p.144
 3. For an advanced treatment of this theme, see N.T. Wright, *“The Lord’s Prayer as a Paradigm of Christian Prayer”* in *“Into God’s Presence: Prayer in the New Testament”* edited by R.L. Longenecker (2001)
 4. Tim Keller, *“Prayer – Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God”* (2016, p.71)
- Ω For a great series of video clips on the Lord’s Prayer, including one on the opening phrases covered in this sermon, go to http://www.commongrace.org.au/the_lords_prayer